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Chairperson, Forty-second Session of the Commission on the Status of Women
United Nations

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Linda Fasulo, NBC News

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STATUS OF WOMEN

Despite the progress women have accomplished during the last few decades, they have not achieved full equality with men. Women and girls still suffer from discrimination and violence in many countries. Patricia Flor, Chairperson of the forty-second session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, discusses a wide range of these issues, as well as the work of the Commission.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Despite the enormous progress women have made in the last few decades, still they are not fully equal with men. Many types of discrimination and violence against women and girls have continued in many parts of the world. Why haven't women realized their full rights? How serious are governments in their efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Our guest today is in a unique positi to reflect on these issues. She is Patricia Flor, Chairperson of the forty-second session of the United Nati Commission on the tatus of Women.

Joining me to talk with Ms. Flor are Rob Watson of the *BBC* and Linda Fasulo of *NBC News*. Ms. Flor welcome to **World Chronicle.**

Ms. Flor, although we have spoken in the introduction about the enormous progress that women have made -- enormous maybe a slight exaggeration, because it seems to me that much of the progress, su as there has been, has been token. Look around the General Assembly Hall, for example, you see a sea of men in gray suits and very few women. The Secretary-General recently appointed a Deputy Secretary-General, first time there has been such an office. He appointed a woman because he insisted on having a woman in that position. But, apart from that woman, there's practically no one of that sex in his Cabinet. So, how can we really say there has been so much progress?

FLOR: Thank you for this question. I think you are totally right in saying there h been progress, but not enough. We need to make further strides. And if I may come to the other issue of question within the United Nations, clearly Member States have called on the Secretary-General to ensure that as we come to the year 2000, we have a 50-50 gender balance in the UN and this means up to highest level.

LITTLEJOHNS: In the Secretariat?

FLOR: In the Secretariat of the UN. Now, it's very, very commendable that, of course, the Secretary-General has taken some steps in that direction, that he has appointed a woman -- Louise Frechette as Deputy -- but then he also has also appointed Ms. Mary Robinson to the post of High Commissioner of Human Rights. But, clearly, we need to go beyond that. We need to move further and Member States and the Commission on the Status of Women is looking forward to further progress being made. If I may come to the global situation -- now if you look at the figures like, for instance, 70 percent the world's poor are actually women, or if you look even in western countries like the OECD countries, women have only 15 of the seats in Parliaments. This is far ...

LITTLEJOHNS: 15?

FLOR: 15 percent -- yes, indeed, which is far from ...

LITTLEJOHNS: In your country in Germany, for example?

FLOR: It is more -- it is over 30 percent in the Federal Parliament. So, we need t find out what practical steps -- what practical methods -- we need in order to promote women and in order

ensure that we make progress worth real gender equality and everything is, of course, appreciated what Member States and governments and NGO's have done. But as we look back to Beijing three years after its adoption ....

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the Conference for Women?

FLOR: The Conference -- the 4th World Conference on Women. It's clear that we have made a commitment and now it's time to put it into reality.

WATSON: For those of us who got frightfully confused about all these UN committees, commissions and one thing and another, can you just explain in language that most of our viewers would understand, what exactly does the Commission do? What's it working on?

FLOR: The Commission is actually 50 years old and it is the main body in the area of women's rights. So it has a clear mandate to promote women's rights, strive for the advancement of women and the empowerment of women and it has tried to do that since 50 years ago. How has it tried to do that? For instance, within the Commission the most important documents -- like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women -- it was drafted and negotiated within the Commission. Another example, the platform of action of Beijing of the Fourth World Conference. Again, it was a text which was negotiated within the Commission functioning as the Preparatory Committee for that and World Conference. So the Commission is, of course, a body of governments, of Member States and governments -- forty five -- which come together and then negotiate. We focus on practical action.

WATSON: Let ... I mean let's stay with these practical things. If you were to look back in the last twelve months, what would you say the best things you have done for women over the last few months?

FLOR: I would say that during the recent session of the Commission, the Commission, for instance, has made the recommendation that in the year 2000 we should have a special session of the General Assembly to review progress since Beijing, but also to consider further initiative and action. And, I think, it is very, very important that in this crucial year-- the year 2000 -- as we go from one century to the other, that the United Nations puts the equality of women and men and the empowerment of women firmly on the agenda.

WATSON: Why a special session in the General Assembly with all these wretched men that Michael was talking about?

FLOR: I'm very confident, that we'll see a lot of women and if you ever have a chance to come to the UN while the Commission is in session, I would encourage you to go there. You'll see that it will be a sea of women and some men, which brings me to another point which is that, of course, we need men to be involved in that. We can't change half of the equation.

WATSON: Is this an offer?

FLOR: That is an offer and that is an invitation to you, so ... I really invite you to come and to see how big the commitment and the interest is of, especially also NGOs. It's not only the government, it's the women's organization.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Flor, are all of the 45 members representatives in your 45-member

Committee women?

FLOR: No, not all of them.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the majority?

FLOR: The majority are women, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: And there's always been a woman chairperson?

FLOR: As far as I can tell, yes. As far as my memory goes back, yes.

FASULO: Can I just ask you, what kinds of practical things does the Commission do, for example, in trying to get governments to implement the various agreements and statutes that would, if implemented, help achieve equality in parts of the world?

FLOR: It tries to give recommendations like if -- one example -- the issue of sexual exploitation, trafficking of women and girls is one that's very prominent. Now, the Commission has called on all governments to ensure that the perpetrators of such crimes cannot only be prosecuted within their own country, but can also be -- and if the crime was committed also in their own country -- but also if they committed the crime in another country and then come back to their own country, think that they can go unpunished. So, the very practical suggestion: please make a law in your own country that ensures that jurisdiction in cases of sexual exploitation, for instance, with minors, girls, that this is punishable wherever you committed your deed ...

FASULO: Have many countries actually implemented that?

FLOR: Some have, for instance, Germany has, but of course, it's a process of legislation. We all know this takes some time. And it's not so easy to do. You have to convince your own constituencies, parliamentarians, and so forth. But it's clear that there is a trend of taking these very practical steps, and that is what the Commission wishes to encourage.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Flor, what would you say is the over-arching issue that you are addressing at this time?

FLOR: The over-arching issue at this time, really, is the platform for action in all its critical areas. And they include like, human rights of women, violence against women, women in armed conflict, women in education, and it goes on the whole list. But the basic point is, of course, how can we achieve gender equality throughout all these areas -- political, economic ...

WATSON: In a nutshell, what you seem to be saying is that the way the Commission works -- the way the Commission works is that you're essentially trying to put pressure on the governments to live up to that commitments.

FLOR: True. But it's not only governments, because in Beijing a lot of other actors made commitments, like the NGO community. We called on employers, on trade unions to look, for instance, at the specific situation of women in the labour market, at the economic situation of women. So, frankly, of course, governments have a crucial role to play and without changing some of the laws, if they are discriminatory, you can't make much progress but, it doesn't end there. It's a process within society and all the actors of society will need to take the actions of their pledge to take in, in Beijing. The same is true, for instance, for the UN system, when the UN Secretariat, UNESCO, UNIFEM, UNICEF, you name it -- all

of them have to be mould in this process and the Commission regularly asks them to report and reminds them to please continue their work in this direction.

WATSON: So, there are -- any of the member tell you 'look, butt off, we don't need any of your interference' -- do you get a negative response?

FLOR: No, I do think that most of the time those organizations -- because they have their mandates, like WHO has the health mandate -- so for them, really, they don't focus then so much on the specific gender aspect. So they are not really ungrateful for the Commission going there and looking at what they've done and saying, 'we appreciate very much your work, but we think under the specific gender aspect, that you should, for instance, look closer at the health implications of malnutrition on girls. You've given us statistics on some of that but we can't really see what is the situation of women and girls, so please have gender this aggregated statistics.'

WATSON: Well, I can just imagine some trade union groups saying, well, well, I remember when I was younger, trade union -- trade union groups -- didn't seem to have too many concerns about women, has that all changed?

FLOR: Probably not globally, but it's starting to change. I just recently read a report from Germany where the trade unions actually have made a report on the situation of women and had really noticed that in many respects, for women there aren't yet equal opportunities in economic life. Why? Because they have a double burden -- they tend to leave their job for two years after they have kids, so -- and all of that is not really -- there's no framework for that. And it has not been included in the agenda and requests by trade unions. But as more and more women move into those trade unions, they, of course, raise their voices and say: 'please, you represent us also and so please put it on the agenda.'

FASULO: It's clear that there are sort of very basic differences in terms of the levels of achievement that women in developing countries versus developed countries have made in a very different issues. Which countries -- can you sort of highlight any countries, maybe in the developing world, that have been especially receptive or, you know, to the status of women commission, or you know, in your mind, just really seems to be a model for moving forward in helping women achieve greater equality?

FLOR: I wouldn't be freely competent to say 'model' and that's also connected to the fact that we haven't yet had all the national action plans. So governments were asked to prepare those national action plans and a lot of them have done so, about 80-90 have done so, but others haven't. So I don't know whether there's a model but what I can say is that, for instance, in the African Region -- in the Southern African Region -- many countries have adopted new laws and many countries have also instituted, either created a ministry or created an institution especially for women's concerns. And I think this is tremendously important because it is the first step in institutionalizing women's concerns. If you have a ministry which takes care of that, then they can talk to the other ministries, they can bring it up in the Cabinet, therefore, you introduce it into the political process. And many, many countries have done that since 1995, which is very encouraging.

WATSON: Which bring up the old chestnuts of a country which does seem to be a rough place to live if you're a woman -- Afghanistan. I mean, is there anything the Commission can do

about Afghanis women on restrictions on going to school, on going to work, I mean you just have to sit here in New York taking in deep intakes of breath (takes deep breath) -- terrible, eh?

FLOR: The Commission has adopted a resolution on that. Now, as we all know, we are not the Security Council, so we can't go out there and enforce it. But what we can do, namely, put the political and moral authority of the Commission behind a resolution which says: ' Women's human rights are being violated by all parties in Afghanistan, in a severe manner.' I mean, it is access to the education system for girls, it is access to the health system for women, in general, it is the pursuit of a profession, it's freedom of movement, you name it. So the Commission has clearly said, these are severe violations of human rights, it has of course, called on the parties to stop them. But it has also, again as a practical suggestion, said that all donor countries and the UN, when they deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, need to ensure that women and men get equal -- an equal share of that. So it cannot be that we, as the western world or whoever feels the responsibility for the people of Afghanistan, then try to help them, but again exclude women indirectly because they allow that all those Afghan will supply. So it's a suggestion that I find is very practical and I hope will be heeded by all those organizations.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Patricia Flor, Chairperson of the forty-second session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Ms. Flor, going beyond Afghanistan I mean, the question of gender equality is -- or the lack of gender equality -- is excused frequently on grounds of culture and religion. How can you overcome those obstacles?

FLOR: If you look at the body of, I may say, legal documents and other international documents, then there is clearly no condition for gender equality. I mean, you take the Charter of the United Nations, you take the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which has some 50th anniversary and you look at it and it simply says that everybody is entitled to enjoy all the rights and freedoms irrespective of sex, race and so forth. So, there's no condition there. It never says anything about culture or tradition. There's no -- it's not conditioned on any of that.

WATSON: It strikes me actually that those great ideological battles of whether men and women were equal or are equal were actually over long ago and that as you say, since the law -- generally international law -- it's generally accepted, of course, that they are equal and that what you are dealing with now is far more sort of practical and in a funny way less exciting, less ideological, is it not? Can that be right?

FLOR: It is really idealistic. I mean, to be quite frank, of course, the argument is made that because we have certain traditions or practices, that we cannot really change that. But I think it cannot be an argument in principle. You know, it is totally true that in order to change a society and its ways, that it is a process of persuasion. You cannot decree that obedient equality, you need to persuade and you need to make people actually change their attitudes and their self-image, for instance, in the case of women. So clearly that's a process to be -- that is involved -- and in this sense, the question of how can you do that, I mean how can you tell people, 'yes, we have had these traditions or rights or rules, but we need to modernize, we need to incorporate some of the basic ideas of the human rights, agenda and so forth. How

do you do that in practical terms?

WATSON: That's right. It would be quite difficult to persuade my mother that men weren't entirely unfair beings, for example.

FASULO: Actually, what I did want to ask you is the question of using carrots and sticks regarding governments and it helping sort of prod them along to implement these various measures. I mean, is there a position the Commission takes in terms of maybe tying or mandating that a certain portion of aid, perhaps, be allocated to these particular goals?

FLOR: Although sometimes we might be interested in that idea, we don't have the authority to do that clearly.

FASULO: Even as a resolution perhaps?

FLOR: What we can do -- what I just explained to you about Afghanistan is really to recommend that this be the ground rules that everybody should follow in terms of a 50-50 distribution between women and men of aid and so hope that this is not really waving with the big stick. It depends, in the end, on political will. And, in a way, the Commission, of course, also embodies part of that political will because there are government representatives saying, 'yes, that is what we believe and we want to do it'. But the implementation also depends a lot on the public, on the reaction, on the demand from the public and from women that this then be really put into reality.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Flor, I noticed that Iran is a member of your Committee. Of course, they have rather strict rules about the role of women in society. What is the position of the Iranian delegate in your Commission? Does he or she go along or object to the majority of views that you expressed there?

FLOR: It is actually a she, if I may say so and the Commission mainly works by consensus. We have our fights and then in the end we try to agree on something that can be supported by everybody and, interestingly, as I said, for instance, the call on Afghanistan or other issues surrounding the human rights and the principle of gender equality has never been objected to by others. It is a consensus-oriented body and I think it's very important that it is because we need to -- especially countries like Iran and others -- also sustain and support this type of consensus. It's very important because it means, again, that you cannot simply come back and say, 'yes, but we have these and other traditions.' You are bound by those facts to a large extent.

FASULO: I also read -- I thought I read -- that women and health is going to be a priority issue of the Commission in the next few years?

FLOR: Next year.

FASULO: Can you sort of explain to us what, you know, what that means and does the issue, for example, of family planning and access to family planning worldwide, you know, is that something that the Commission would deal with in this kind of issue.

FLOR: Yes, the whole critical area of health was one of the most contentious and it still is and continues to be. And this is true across all regions and the globe because it's exactly like you say, we have to deal with family planning. Of course, then abortion is not -- it's mentioned but it's one of the issues that you have to discuss in this context. But it goes, of course, beyond that because reproductive

health, again -- of course -- it implies access to the health system, but more than it would, for instance, involve some kind of education on health and health issues and reproductive health and so forth and it involves sexual rights -- question of also deciding how many children you have -- all that is very contentious and, in this perspective, it would be very hard work.

WATSON: But those are absolutely the most explosive issues women's rights achieves that if the Commission came down firmly saying that women do have the right to choose - absolutely declare the right to choose whether to have an abortion or not, you have clearly upset an awful lot of people and then by sort of by equivocating about these issues in a typical UN they say, 'oh, it's all wishy washy about everything.'

FLOR: It's interesting that you say that because there are moments in the Commission when a decision needs to be made by everybody in the Commission. Do we accept to have a vote? Because if you accept having a vote, you might have a resolution which is adopted by majority of the members which makes a very clear statement, for instance, on reproductive health or some other issue, but at the same time, it's clear that you don't have unanimity. So really, it's seen from the perspective of women and women's advancement. The question then becomes: 'is it better to allow for this international consensus?' Because then you can say with time, 'now, this is the standard'. It's a universal standard. Everybody has to adhere to it. Or, is it better to put plainly into the text what some members think is right which will, of course, only entail that the others say, 'well, we voted against it, it does not apply to us. You do what you wish, but we are not bound by it.'

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Flor, what is the stages of the Convention on all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Has that been approved or is it in process of being drafted, or what actually is happening there?

FLOR: Oh, it's actually been enforced for about 20 years -- more than 20 years now -- and it is a Convention which is among the most ratified so it has more than 150 ratifications. Unfortunately, it also has a lot of reservations which by countries to say, 'well, it applies only in a certain -- under certain circumstances so far'. But it is an essential instrument and the Commission, if I may add, the Commission has just been working on its Optional Protocol to this Convention. What would that do? It would allow a complaint by an individual so -- by one woman for instance in the US, well, not the US, you haven't ratified ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Anywhere.

FLOR: ... but anywhere, where the government has ratified the Convention and to your protocol a woman could then go, could lodge a complaint with the Committee which is charged of overseeing that and could say, 'I have been -- my rights have been violated by an action or inaction of the government so, therefore, I demand that this international body make recommendation ...

WATSON: Do you think men and women are gonna be equal by the year 2000 or beyond?

FLOR: I would say in the 21st century, we'll get it. We'll get gender equality and I'm extremely sure that this is what is going to happen.

WATSON: I'm glad to see that men's rights will be coming up then.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned that the United States has not ratified the Convention on Discrimination Against Women. Why is that?

FLOR: Well, I'm not - I can't talk about the US Government, but ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Have they given you an explanation of why they haven't?

FLOR: Not really. I mean, it's of course the sovereign right of every country to decide whether they want to ratify or not and I really can't answer that question.

LITTLEJOHNS: And how many countries did you say have?

FLOR: More than 150.

LITTLEJOHNS: Uh-huh. I saw in one of the reports something about the status of Palestinian women. Has Israel ratified it -- the Convention?

FLOR: I am not sure, but I think yes, I do think they have.

LITTLEJOHNS: So, if this Protocol that we spoke about is finally adopted, Palestinian women would be able to take some action if they felt they were the subject to discrimination by the authorities in the Occupied Territories?

FLOR: Under the condition that Israel also ratifies the Optional Protocol. The name 'optional' says that it's not composite. You have to ratify the Optional Protocol in addition to the Convention to open this part for individual complaints. But under this condition, then, of course, then women would have this opportunity ..

LITTLEJOHNS: So this is probably a long way down the road, isn't it?

FLOR: It's a long way down the road but we hope that this Optional Protocol could come into force soon and then it depends on how many countries ratify to see how many women around the world will have this chance.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Flor, we're at the end of our road -- that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Patricia Flor, Chairperson of the forty-second session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. She was interviewed by Rob Watson of the *BBC* and Linda Fasulo of *NBC News*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**